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MY RECOLLECTIONS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

By Gibson William Harris

A Law Student in Lincoln and Herndon's Office From 1845 to 1847

EDITOR'S NOTE—This is the second in a series of four articles that was begun in the Woman's Home Companion for November. The next paper will treat of Lincoln's masterful mentality, and will describe his methods in dealing with clients, especially as illustrated by some interesting law-cases of which Mr. Harris was personally cognizant. Still more interesting to the majority of readers will be its presentation of Mr. Lincoln as not only an admiring and effective reciter of Burns, Shakespeare, Byron and Poe, and of the now famous poem "Mortality," but in the role of a poet himself.

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A Born Gentleman

MR. LINCOLN, as I remember him, had a quaintness of manner that strongly individualized him in any place or any company. His cousin Dennis Hanks was only voicing the general opinion in a vernacular idiom when he said, "There was always something *peculiarsome* about Abe." In his intercourse with others his simplicity and unaffectedness were most engaging. I never heard him use an oath or make a vulgar remark, and never knew of his doing an improper thing. He was the purest man, both in speech and action—I make the statement deliberately—of all the men I have known on intimate terms. He made one feel that it was good to be with him.

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There was nothing conventional in his regard for the feelings of all with whom he dealt. It was part of his being, coming as natural to him as it was to breathe. He never browbeat a witness or juggled the statements of one. He never quizzed an acquaintance. That his clerk's development was yet in the callow stage must have been instantly apparent to him, but not once did he remind me of it; on the other hand, he encouraged me in many ways. Once, and only once, did I succeed in drawing from him an opinion derogatory of another, and that related to a certain attorney of very showy parts, yet capable of only feeble and disconnected arguments. After expressing myself quite freely, I bluntly asked him whether my estimate was not correct. The felicitous answer was, "Well, I consider him rather a *shot-gun lawyer*." Thousands of times Abraham Lincoln has been written up as awkward, ungainly, ugly, but to me he had the kindliest eye, the sweetest smile and the most pleasing face I had ever known, and it is no stretch of the truth to say I have always thought about him as of a personality most attractive, if not actually handsome.

Mr. Lincoln's Physical Traits

The antithesis of features and expression was very pronounced in Abraham Lincoln. The expression not merely relieved the plainness of his features; it transformed, on occasions transfigured, them. The look of patient benignity which became the abiding memory that callers at the White House carried away during the dreadful days of the Civil War was a familiar one, even in the 40's, to those who had any dealings with him. But to strangers his appearance was not prepossessing. While his six feet and four inches gave him a commanding stature, he was loosely built, gauntly spare in flesh, flat-chested and inclined to stoop. The impression of angularity given at first sight was heightened by his length of arms and legs, and that of awkwardness by the size of his hands and feet. His complexion was sallow and his cheeks sunken, both which items were the more noticeable from the fact that he wore neither beard nor whiskers (nor did he ever do so till after his election to the presidency). The prominent nose and square chin betokened strength, but they were not modeled on lines of beauty. The blue-gray eyes when in repose were rather dull-looking. Nevertheless, to see how they kindled the moment he began addressing you or became interested in a subject under discussion was wonderful; it resembled the uprushing waves of light in a winter sky when an aurora borealis is on.

In walking his step was such that his foot came down flat on the ground. I can see him now, in memory, as he daily appeared on the streets of Springfield, his arms slowly swinging, his head and body bent slightly forward, his whole aspect that of a man in deep thought, from which, however, he was easily roused, never failing to make hearty acknowledgment of a salutation, whether from friend or stranger. He was slow, or more properly, deliberate, in his movements. I cannot recall ever having seen him walk briskly, much less run, though his long limbs carried him over the ground with more speed than one was apt to realize at first. While possessing great physical strength, he was sparing in its use.

"Back would go his head, and he would laugh as unrestrainedly as any of his auditors"

His Indifference to Dress

He manifested no concern for his personal appearance, so far as dressiness went. Provided his clothing was clean and comfortable, the cut of it did not trouble him in the least. The blue jeans in which he was clad when I first saw him, in 1840, had been discarded in favor of broadcloth some time before his marriage. The day I entered his office, in 1845, he had on a black suit—coat and trousers of cloth, vest of satin, and the buckram stock about his neck was covered with black silk. Mrs. Lincoln, as was generally known in Springfield, wished him to "spruce up" more, and perhaps this had something to do with the adoption of the buckram stock, forcing him, as it did, to carry his head more erect than would an ordinary tie. In summer he was accustomed to wear shoes of what was known as the Wellington style, but in winter he wore boots. His hat was a regulation "stove-pipe," the same as it was when he filled the presidential chair.

One anecdote that passed current in those days derived almost as much point from his disregard of style in dress as from his well-known character as a humorist. A friend, passing him on the sidewalk one day, exclaimed, "Abe, your coat is too short in the waist!" Lincoln looked up with a twinkle in his eye, and quick as a flash, retorted, "Never mind: it will be long enough before I get another!" Whether or not the same *bon mot* is with justice credited to a witty English bishop I do not know, but its attribution to Lincoln is strictly correct.

Lincoln Miscellanies

Mr. Lincoln's indifference respecting dress was equaled by his indifference respecting money. His wants were few and simple, and as long as he had enough to supply them for the present he seemed to

have no use for money, except to give it away or lend it, often with no expectation of return, to those in need of it. He preferred plain food, and a very moderate amount satisfied him. Of liquor he often said he did not know the taste, nor did he use tobacco in any form.

He had a decided fondness for chess and checkers, though no games of any kind were permitted at the office. In playing either, his method was to act on the defensive until the game had reached a stage where an aggressive policy was clearly indicated. He liked ten-pins also, and occasionally indulged in them. Whatever may have been his youthful tastes in regard to hunting and fishing, at this period both sports were ignored.

From his mother, a woman of superior endowments, he inherited a melancholy that was ineradicable, though it became less marked after his marriage. The angle of incidence is the same as that of reflection; day and night, taking the year through, divide the twenty-four hours equally. Lincoln was gifted with an extraordinary sense of humor, and necessarily he must know its counterpart of gloom. It was my good fortune to see in him very much more of the bright side than the dark. When in repose or in deep contemplation, his face even then wore a sad, or more correctly a far-away, expression, that made one long to wake him up, as it were, and bring him back to his accustomed geniality and winning smile. I never heard his partner or any one else in Springfield refer to his occasional blue spells, and am very sure he got altogether more of merriment than of moping out of life. It took me no great time to learn that a very slight thing would break up his brooding.

He liked to read the Bible, and in his way he was a religious man, though not a church-member. At the period in question his position seemed to be that he shrank from subscribing in full to any of the creeds that were known to him; he would not make a pretense of doing that, and could not force himself to it as a duty. His character as a total abstainer being well known, he was often called on to make temperance addresses, yet he did not join any temperance society. It is significant that he never belonged to a fraternal order, nor to a secret society of any kind.

"In this attitude he would digest the mental food he had just taken"

In Conversation and in Story-Telling

In conversation Mr. Lincoln was always instructive, always entertaining, and almost always amusing. He seemed never to talk without some definite aim in view. The few stories I heard him relate were told in each instance to illustrate some well-defined point. He was rather disposed, in ordinary cases, to claim the larger share of time in conversation, but he was not only a good listener, but in general an animated questioner, whenever there was information to be gained. His aptitude for assimilating the facts of any subject in which he was interested was only less remarkable than the faculty he had for retaining them in his memory.

When telling a story, he had a mannerism peculiarly his own. If he was seated in a chair or on a dry-goods box (it was generally one or the other), his feet would be planted flat upon the floor or ground, until near the story's end, at which juncture his eyes would begin to sparkle and his right leg be seen to raise slowly; suddenly, at the instant the climax was reached, the right leg would be thrown across the left, back would go his head, and he would laugh as unrestrainedly as any of his auditors. There was never any straining for effect; the heartiness and spontaneity of it all delightfully enhanced the story's effectiveness.

Lincoln's humor was a wellspring of pleasure to his acquaintanceship, which practically included all Springfield. One specimen of it that has become famous I am able to locate. Loafing on one of the street-corners next to the public square, several men were wrangling one day over the ideal length, in proportion to the body, for a man's leg. Lincoln came sauntering along, and to his decision the gang of loafers agreed to submit the point. "Abe," called out one of them, "how long ought a man's legs to-be?" "Well, gentlemen," was the prompt reply, "I don't pretend to know *exactly*, but it seems to me they should be long enough to reach from his body to the ground!"

The Race for Congress in 1846

Illinois was long a Democratic state, but it contained one Congressional District almost as stanchly Whig as Daniel Webster's own state of Massachusetts. This was the so-called Sangamon District, which in the 40's contained more than an ample supply of congressional timber, including John J. Hardin, afterward killed in the Mexican War; Edward D. Baker, who fell at Ball's Bluff, in the Civil War; Abraham Lincoln, a recognized leader; and Judge Stephen D. Logan. Lincoln's law partner from 1841 to 1843—all men of ability and all Whigs. To avoid strife, they agreed among themselves that if elected each should serve but one term and leave the field open for the next, and each became, in the order above mentioned, the Whig nominee. The conferences of these and other Whig leaders, when not mere casual street meetings, were generally held in the Law Library rooms in the State House; none of them (unless it was Hardin, who resided in Jacksonville) had an office with chairs enough to accommodate the most modest caucus.

When Mr. Lincoln, in 1846, made up his mind to stand for the nomination, the duty fell to me of writing letters, at his dictation, to influential men in the different counties, down to even obscure precincts. Finding the task not only burdensome, but slow, I suggested the use of a printed circular letter, but the proposal was vetoed offhand. A printed letter, he said, would not have nearly the same effect; a written one had the stamp of personality, was more flattering to the recipient, and would tell altogether more in assuring his good-will, if not his support. So for several days the clerk was kept busy in writing more letters. Young and inexperienced as I was, I could not help noticing how shrewdly they were put together, no two exactly alike. He approached each correspondent in a different way, and I soon reached the conclusion that the necessity he felt for doing this was his weightiest reason, after all, for discarding type.

Discussing one day the chances for his nomination, I expressed myself with some warmth to the effect that, as rival aspirants were using so much unfairness, there was small encouragement for us to proceed any further unless we were willing to adopt similar tactics. Without the least sign of disconcertment, he replied, "Gibson, I *want* to be nominated. I should like very much to go to Congress; but unless I can get there by *fair* means I shall not go. If it depends on some other course, I will stay at home." That settled it, of course.

Lincoln a Congressman

Lincoln received the nomination, and when the time came was elected by a majority of more than fifteen hundred (three times the usual Whig majority of the district), and great was the rejoicing in our office. Lincoln's opponent in this campaign was the noted pioneer preacher, Peter Cartwright. I never saw the two men together, nor do I recall any stump-speaking incident of more than passing interest. The last time I saw Peter Cartwright he was exchanging confidences, in his peculiar fortissimo, with one of his late partisans, both of them berating one Wright for being an Abolitionist. I remember the desire was expressed to slap Wright's jaws, with the avowed intention to do just that thing if the chance ever offered.

Mrs. Lincoln and the two children went to Washington with the Sangamon representative for the first, or long, session of the Thirtieth Congress, which assembled in December, 1847. Meantime the Mexican War had come on. In common with the Whig leaders in general, Lincoln regarded the war as unjustifiable, and so declared himself, thereby alienating many political friends and bringing him many faultfinding letters. Nor was this all. Dissatisfaction with his course on this question entailed defeat on his friend, Judge Logan, who became the Whig nominee in 1848. Opposed though he was to the Mexican War, on principle, Lincoln never withheld his vote from measures for the support of the United States forces in the field, a record which later stood him in excellent stead.

Routine Life in Lincoln's Office

Lincoln and Herndon's office consisted of one large room on the second floor of the building in which was the post-office. Across the hall, and directly over the post-office, the clerk of the United States District Court held forth. The furniture, nearly all of it in a more or less dilapidated condition, comprised one small desk and a table, both of them quite plain, a sofa, or lounge, with raised head at one end, and half a dozen wooden chairs. Over the desk a few shelves had been inclosed; this was the office bookcase, holding a set of Blackstone, Kent's Commentaries, Chitty's Pleadings and a very moderate number of other books. There was a fine law library in the Capitol Building, and to this the attorneys of the city enjoyed free access at all times. The floor in our office was almost never scrubbed, and the sweeping was done by the clerk.

As was the case with all the Springfield lawyers of any note, nearly all of Lincoln's practice as an advocate was on the circuit. This was before the days of railroads and great corporations. Suits of magnitude were unknown, and fees were small. Late in his career as a practising attorney, Mr. Lincoln is said to have received one fee of two thousand dollars; if so, the case, which concerned a patent on the McCormick reaper, must have been very much the most lucrative one that he ever had. In the office, where lay my little round of duties, it was usually such petty work as the drawing up of unimportant deeds, mortgages and contracts. To be actually present at a trial was a rare treat for any Springfield law student.

The prevailing notion seems to be that Lincoln spent a large part of his time in spinning yarns. Undoubtedly he did tell a great many stories, with never a poor one among them. But they were not told in the office. An attorney's "den" is about the last place for genial humor; for, except to peculiarly constituted minds, the law is a dry and uninteresting study. In a lawyer's office, moreover, the tendency to believe in total depravity is depressingly strong, such is the somber light in which human nature frequently shows itself in the confidings of client to counsel. It was on the circuit—at the hotels, or sometimes in the court-room itself—that Lincoln's stories were usually gotten off. At the office we heard less of them than did the street gamins outside. There the talk ran on points of law, mankind in general, current politics, and little else.

RESIDENCE OF GIBSON W. HARRIS, HOLLY HILL, FLORIDA

His Days of Leisure, and How They Were Passed

When the courts were not in session the senior partner spent more time out of the office than in it. A likely place to find him was some street-corner, there discussing with others at their ease the topics of the day. He chummed with everyone, Whig or Democrat, and particularly with the young men, a class among whom he was especially popular. He was hail-fellow with them all. From the time of his mature manhood Lincoln learned more, as I believe, from contact with his fellow-men than from books. "Honest Old Abe" was a colloquialism familiar to all Springfield before he was thirty-seven. Strange to say, he deemed himself old, and took undisguised pleasure in fathering many of us younger persons, including some already in their thirties.

It would not be fair to speak of Lincoln as an idler save in his aversion to bodily labor. His brain was a singularly active one—seemed never to rest, never to tire. Yet as a formal student Lincoln struck me as actually lazy. Days of leisure came frequently, and on such he might sometimes be seen sitting in his chair, with his feet on the office table, reading the office copy of Burns or Byron. He would read for an hour or more, then close the book and stretch himself at full length on the office lounge, his feet projecting over the end of it, hands under his head and eyes closed, and in this attitude would digest the mental food he had just taken, not merely thinking over what he had read, but seeking to reproduce it in his mind. But weeks might pass before this would be repeated. He read but little at the office, and I have never imagined there was much burning of the midnight oil at his home.

The truth is, unless I am greatly mistaken, Abraham Lincoln never studied hard at any period of his life. He did not need to study *hard*. With him a single reading was sufficient to afford a clear insight into any ordinary subject. It almost seemed as if, in a previous existence, he had acquired a knowledge of things, and in this life needed only to refresh his memory, now by reading and now by colloquy with others.